The Kabbalah, Science, and the Enlightenment

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During the past thirty years, there has been increasing willingness on the part of scholars to recognize the important ways in which esoteric thought contributed to the development of science and the emergence of religious toleration. The purpose of this paper is to insert the Kabbalah into this more accurate and nuanced picture of early modern thought. As I hope to show, not only did the Christian Kabbalah play a role in the transition from the early modern to the modern world, but it also influenced the work of three giants in the field of the history of religions, Gershom Scholem, Henri Corbin, and Mircea Eliade. This may seem like a lunatic idea. After all, didn’t the great Jewish scholar Heinrich Graetz emphasize the corrosive effects of the Kabbalah and consider it the arch-enemy of the rational rabbinic tradition and rational thought of any kind? Most people would probably agree with Graetz in seeing the rational and the mystical as polar opposites. It is certainly the case that until relatively recently most people and the majority of scholars believed that modern science emerged only when rationalist philosophers rejected religious and occult thought.¹ In fact, before the 1960s, scholars like me were routinely relegated to the “lunatic fringe of the British Museum Reading Room,” to quote John Saltmarsh, and deemed to be “tinctured with the kind of lunacy...[we] set out to describe,” to cite Sir Herbert Butterfield.

But it was precisely this antithesis between good science and bad occultism that was called into question by Dame Frances Yates with the publication of Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition in 1964. In this work she argued for the importance and widespread influence of the “Hermetic-Cabalist” tradition on the arts, philosophy, and science of the Renaissance and early modern periods. Yates’ work came in for considerable (and sometimes ferocious) criticism on the grounds that her use of the term “Hermeticism” was vague and unreliable, her reading of texts misleading, and her generalizations unwarranted.² Many of these criticisms were justified. However, as the dust began to settle, it became increasingly apparent that Yates’ broad insight into the role of occultism in shaping aspects of modern thought have been immensely stimulating in terms of subsequent scholarship. This is especially true in the relatively new field of Western Esotericism founded by Antoine Faivre, which has built on Yates’ work and refined it in significant ways, especially by emphasizing the historical diversity of the various strands of esoteric thought and their complex relationship with science.

As one of Yates’ last students, I have benefited enormously from the way that Faivre and his colleagues have carried Yates’ work forward, and it is with their work in mind that I present this paper which focuses on the integration of themes from the Jewish Kabbalah into early modern European thought and the effect this integration had in promoting the advancement of science and the ideal of toleration, twin pillars of the Enlightenment. No one would deny that Kabbalists—at least some Kabbalists—attained enlightenment in a spiritual sense, but that the Kabbalah actually contributed to the Enlightenment in its eighteenth-century form is another matter all together. But, a close look at the work of the two foremost Christian Kabbalists of the seventeenth century, Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698) and Christian Knorr von Rosenroth
(1636-1689), reveals the powerful effect the Kabbalah had in promoting their agenda of ecumenism and social and scientific reform. My goal in this talk is to convince you that the kabbalistic philosophy of van Helmont, Knorr, and their colleagues contributed to the emergence of modern science by promoting the idea that man was essentially good, human ingenuity a noble tool in the inevitable march of progress, and experiment a legitimate way to comprehend the book of nature and glorify God.

As I hope to show, van Helmont’s and Knorr’s kabbalistic philosophy offered a viable vitalistic alternative to atomism, Cartesianism, and the mechanical philosophy. Furthermore, it was perfectly possible to adhere to the Kabbalah while employing a genuine scientific methodology involving a skeptical, empirical, and mathematical approach to scientific knowledge. And finally, as we shall see, van Helmont and Knorr were deeply interested in the practical and technological aspects of their scientific endeavors, another characteristic of the scientific revolution. Like Francis Bacon, they were as concerned to produce “fruit” as “light”.

Much has been written about the crucial role the late seventeenth century played in preparing the way for the Enlightenment. In ways that may never be fully understood, Luther and Calvin’s view of man as a lowly worm so inextricably inured in sin that he could do absolutely nothing to mollify an angry God or contribute to his own salvation gradually gave way to the optimistic idea that man was in charge of his own destiny as well as the world’s. The belief in the power and perspicacity of man arose in part from esoteric sources, from alchemy, Hermeticism, Renaissance Neoplatonism, and the Kabbalah. In different ways, each of these philosophies advocated the idea that man could perfect himself and the world. This is where van Helmont and Knorr von Rosenroth become important, for they were both alchemists and Kabbalists committed to reform in all areas of life. They were not ivory-tower scholars but entered the political arena as advisors to several German princes, suggesting ways to restore the shattered economies and reduce religious tensions in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War. Their published works advocate an ideal of social justice and religious toleration that make inspiring reading to this day. For example, they jointly translated and published a remarkably progressive book on penal reform that stressed the social origins of crime and called for rehabilitation rather than retribution. And they cogently criticized the medical establishment for its scientific rigidity and social elitism. But the high point of their literary endeavors came with the publication of two kabbalistic works, van Helmont’s *Short Sketch of the truly Natural Hebrew Alphabet*, which has a glowing preface written by Knorr, and their joint publication of the *Kabbala denudata*, or Kabbalah unveiled, the largest collection of kabbalistic texts available to the Latin reading public until the nineteenth century.

I have to admit that when faced with van Helmont’s book on the Hebrew alphabet, I did for a moment think I had entered a lunatic universe. Van Helmont believed that, if correctly understood, the Hebrew language provided access to the divine and natural secrets of the universe. Time had corrupted Hebrew, but van Helmont was convinced he had rediscovered a key to understanding Hebrew as originally spoken and written. The key lay in the fact that written Hebrew letters corresponded to the tongue movements made while pronouncing them. [Testing this in the old reading room in the British Museum.]

As you can see from the frontispiece of this book, van Helmont made this discovery while incarcerated in the dungeons of the Roman Inquisition. Here we see him sitting in his prison cell in comfortable slippers, calipers
in one hand, pen in the other, as he enunciates individual Hebrew letters before a mirror. It is typical of van Helmont that at the very moment he was in danger of being tortured, even executed, on the charge of “Judaizing,” he should reiterate the theories that had gotten him in such hot water in the first place and under the very eyes of his captors.

Van Helmont’s and von Rosenroth’s intention in publishing their second kabbalistic work, the *Kabbala denudata*, was to offer Christians a translation of the high points of the Zohar (or Book of Splendor), the central work in the literature of Jewish Kabbalah. The Zohar, along with other kabbalistic writings, came to possess the same attractions for Christians as the Hermetica, the Sibylline Prophecies, and Orphic and Pythagorean texts. All were thought to contain elements of that ancient, esoteric wisdom God had imparted to Adam in the Garden of Eden and again to Moses on Mt. Sinai; but being Jewish and not pagan in origin, the Kabbalah was thought by many to be the preeminent source for this *prisca theologia*, or first and divine philosophy.

In order to help the reader understand the Zohar, a notoriously difficult text, the editors of the *Kabbala denudata* included lengthy excerpts from later kabbalistic works. The majority of these were written by the disciples of Isaac Luria, a sixteenth century Kabbalist, whose work van Helmont and von Rosenroth valued highly. The Lurianic Kabbalah is distinct from that of earlier writers. Instead of concentrating on cosmology and explanations of creation, Luria stresses the redemption and millennium.

The doctrine of reincarnation is an important aspect of Luria’s thought; it is the pivot around which Luria builds his philosophy and explains both the creation and the ultimate redemption of all things. In Lurianic thought, exile is both a prerequisite to creation and the cause of evil and sin. Luria reasons that in order for there to be a place for the world, God had to withdraw from a part of himself. This doctrine of *Tzimzum* (withdrawal) was both profound and ambiguous. It provided a symbol of exile in the deepest sense, within the God himself, but it also implied that evil was intrinsic to the process of creation and not attributable to man alone.

According to the complex mythology of the Lurianic Kabbalah, after God withdrew from himself, traces of light were left in the void. These traces were formed into the image of the primordial man, *Adam Kadmon*, who was the first manifested configuration of the divine. However, at this point a catastrophe occurred. Further divine lights burst forth from *Adam Kadmon* but the “vessels” meant to contain them shattered. With “the breaking of the vessels”, evil came into the world as sparks of light (souls) became sunk in matter.

Luria grants human beings a central role in mending the broken vessels. Moshe Idel has described this role as nothing less than “universe maintenance activity.” Luria interpreted history as a constant struggle between the forces of good and evil, in which each successive generation from Adam up to the present participates in the process of *tikkun*, or restoration. Although the process of *tikkun* will be long and arduous, restoration will eventually occur as each exiled being moves up the ladder of creation, becoming better and increasingly spiritual until finally freed from the cycle of rebirth. Luria was an animist. Everything was alive and full of souls. Matter and spirit were dual aspects of a single entity, substance, and every created substance was engaged in constant transmutation and evolution towards a higher state.

The focus of the Lurianic Kabbalah on redemption and the millennium had enormous appeal for van Helmont and van Rosenroth, who found in the concepts of
reincarnation and restoration the basis for an impregnable theodicy. Human beings were responsible for their own sin and suffering, but God was lenient and granted every soul the necessary time to achieve salvation. On the basis of this belief, van Helmont and von Rosenroth categorically rejected the existence of an eternal hell. Punishment was “medicinal”; it was inflicted on creatures for their own good and improvement. This was an extremely unorthodox view at the time, since the fear of hell was considered the only way to keep most people, especially the common sort, in line.

But what exactly is my evidence that the Kabbala denudata was connected to the scientific revolution and the coming of the Enlightenment? The fact that the work is dedicated to the “lover of philosophy, the lover of Hebrew, and the lover of chemistry” should give us pause. Hebrew, philosophy, and chemistry? This is clearly a strange combination by modern lights, but not for the editors, who saw the Kabbalah as a key to unlock the two great books God had given mankind, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. This is the basic iconographic message of the frontispiece, which you see before you. This is hardly a great work of art, but its symbolism is important for the point I am trying to make about the influence of the Kabbalah on European culture as a whole. The female figure in this complex landscape is the Kabbalah, and the keys hanging on a cord from her wrist indicate that the Kabbalah alone is able to unlock the secrets of both the Old and New Testaments.

This frontispiece emphasizes the encyclopedic nature of the Kabbalah. Not only does it provide a theology that will unite Christians, Jews, and pagans, but it offers a morality and ethic that calms the passions besetting the soul (illustrated by stormy sea to the right of the figure and the ship foundering in the waves). In addition to doing all this, the Kabbalah provides an entrance to the “Palace of Secrets,” the building whose entrance appears on the left. This is the palace of the secrets of natural philosophy, represented by alchemy and chemistry. Thus the Kabbalah not only provides the key to understanding the divine world but keys to the physical world as well. Let me point out how central the idea of a palace or temple of knowledge was throughout European history. The origin of this idea lay in Solomon’s temple, which was believed to be a repository of all the arts and sciences, and it continued to be extremely influential throughout the Enlightenment, especially among Masons.

Now all this must seem unbelievably esoteric, improbable and even unimportant, but as this frontispiece shows, by accepting the kabbalistic idea of tikkun, some Christian Kabbalists rejected the Christian notion of salvation as a personal matter achieved through faith in an external savior and embraced instead the kabbalistic idea that human beings had the ability and God-given mandate to work for the improvement and salvation of every creature and created thing. This shift from the divine to the human plane fostered a more optimistic vision of man, a view that in many cases led Christian Kabbalists to reject the concepts of original sin, an eternal hell, and an irredeemably corrupted world. It is for this reason I argue that the Kabbalah contributed to the enlightenment belief in science as a progressive social force.

The Kabbalah was not restricted to the small circle of Christian Kabbalists at the Sulzbach court. Van Helmont traveled extensively and wherever he went, the Kabbala went with him. One place he visited frequently was Hanover, where he spent long periods of time with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Many of you undoubtedly know Leibniz from the hilarious but very much mistaken view
of his philosophy presented by Voltaire in *Candide*. Here Leibniz is satirized in the character of Dr. Pangloss, the fatuous philosopher, who no matter what awful thing happens, reiterates his conviction that this is, as he says, “the best of all possible worlds.” Not even a disastrous shipwreck, a very, very bad case of syphilis, his botched execution by the Inquisition—only botched because an earthquake intervened—or the fact that he regained consciousness just in time to avoid being dissected could convince Dr. Pangloss that his optimism was misplaced.

But Leibniz was not the fool Voltaire made him out to be. He did not, as Voltaire claimed, believe that this world is the best possible in its present state but only because it had the capacity to become increasingly better largely through the rational and scientific endeavors of mankind. If Leibniz had been the complacent determinist he is so often made out to be, what can explain his life-long preoccupation with improving the human condition, first by working for religious unity and toleration and, second, by devising all kinds of socially useful inventions? His calculator is perhaps the best known of these. But in addition to that, he proposed plans for a high speed coach the would proceed along tracks on something like ball bearings, an inland navigation system, a public health and fire service, street lighting, and steam-powered fountains. On a more mundane level, he drew up plans for a more efficient wheelbarrow, better cooking pots, and my favorite, shoes with springs to allow for “fast getaways.” [Let me just mention here that as I was thinking about this talk, I happened to watch a CNN report on a Russian team of scientists who had come up with a design for gas propelled shoes that could attain a speed of 60 kilometers per hour. It was suggested that they would be especially useful for postmen and policemen. But even more to the point, in capitalist America shoes with springs are now on the market!] Leibniz worked on these practical inventions in the company of van Helmont. The friendship between these two men was very close, close enough for Leibniz to ghost van Helmont’s last book, a kabbalistic interpretation of Genesis, as you can see from the next transparency [transparency: *Genesis*].

Ghost-writing a book for a self-proclaimed Kabbalist is an extraordinary act for someone supposedly unaffected by kabbalistic theories. Leibniz’s relationship and collaboration with van Helmont was reflected in the generous epitaph he wrote for his friend [transparency]. The last two lines indicate the measure of his admiration: “If he had been born in earlier centuries among the Greeks,/ He would now be numbered among the stars.”

It has been alleged that Leibniz derived the term “monad” from various philosophers, ranging from Giordano Bruno to Henry More. However, a strong case can be made for van Helmont and Knorr as his most direct and important sources. Both men accepted the kabbalistic idea that matter and spirit were dual aspects of a single substance. “Dull,” “sluggish,” or “sleepy” monads, to use van Helmont’s adjectives, were clustered at the material end of the spectrum, while “active,” and “awake” monads gravitated to the spiritual end. This was the direction all monads eventually would take as a result of repeated reincarnations. I believe that Leibniz adopted this scheme in his own work, expressing it, however, in a more readily accessible philosophical vocabulary. Michael Gottlieb Hansch describes Leibniz musing on these matters while drinking a trendy cup of *caffe latte*. As Hansch reports:

I remember that once, when Leibniz and I met in Leipzig and were drinking *caffe latte*, a beverage which he greatly savored, he said that in the cup from which he was drinking there might be, for all we know, monads that in future time would become human souls.
Voltaire, in his usual fashion, upped the ante and says that Leibniz claimed that even a drop of urine or a bit of excrement contained an infinity of monads. \(^{11}\) Be that as it may, I am convinced that by the end of his life Leibniz accepted the radical, kabbalistic idea of *tikkun* and consequently believed that every created thing would eventually reach a state of perfection as a result of repeated transformations. \(^{12}\) Leibniz was not the only friend van Helmont introduced to the Kabbalah. In 1670, he traveled to England and while there met the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who implored van Helmont to visit his good friend Lady Anne Conway. From the age of eighteen Conway suffered from increasingly severe headaches that had baffled even the great William Harvey. Conway had been subjected to excruciating medical procedures. She almost died as a result of prolonged treatments with mercury; she had been dosed with tobacco and coffee, both deemed medicinal at that early date; she had even ventured across the channel to be trepanned, although once there no one dared to perform the operation and her jugular vein was opened instead, an equally risky operation one would have thought. \(^{13}\) Henry More hoped that van Helmont’s skill as an alchemist and physician would prove equal to the task of curing her. He was to be disappointed. But although van Helmont could not help Conway as a physician, he helped her as a Kabbalist by enabling her to envision her own suffering as part of the divine redemptive process of *tikkun*. Van Helmont stayed with Conway until her death nine years later. During this period they collaborated on several kabbalistic works. Conway also wrote a small treatise on her own, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, in which she employed kabbalistic theories to refute the theories of Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza. \(^{14}\) It is arguably the most interesting work published by a woman in the seventeenth century and all the more interesting because Leibniz thought highly of it. \(^{15}\)

Van Helmont’s association with Conway is not only memorable for their mutual interest in the Kabbalah but also for the profound effect their kabbalistic philosophy had on contemporary Quakers. The Quakers were ardent proselytizers - not the temperate types we now associate with Quaker oats - but when they made their first missionary visit to Conway in 1675, they found more than they bargained for in van Helmont, who was as eager as they were to proselytize. A sect of so-called “Helmontian” Quakers arose from this encounter. These Quakers found in the kabbalistic idea of reincarnation a solution to the problem posed by the fact that Christianity had developed in a specific time and place. For how could such a religion promise love and mercy if the vast majority of human beings were bound to be eternally damned because they lived either before Jesus was born or in parts of the world that had never heard of him? The Lurianic doctrines of reincarnation and restoration solved this problem by offering a theodicy in which God allowed individuals to be reincarnated until they achieved salvation. This solution was not, however, to the liking of the Quakers as a whole, and van Helmont left the Society, although he spoke with admiration of the Quakers to his dying day. \(^{16}\) But this was not the end of the story; the next step leads to John Locke.

Van Helmont figures prominently in Locke’s correspondence, but as in the case of his association with Leibniz, this has been entirely overlooked. For what could John Locke, the defender of reason and most famous exponent of British empiricism, possibly have to say to an alchemist, Kabbalist, and Quaker? The answer is, a lot. From Locke’s correspondence it is clear that he read van Helmont’s books, commented on
them, and even helped to get them published. Locke’s library contained van Helmont’s works as well as a copy of the *Kabbala denudata.*

Even more improbable is the visit made to Locke during this period by William Clarke, one of the “Helmontian,” or kabbalistic, Quakers I mentioned earlier. Clarke showed Locke and van Helmont a tract he had written in defense of van Helmont’s kabbalistic theory of reincarnation. In a letter to Locke the following year, Clarke complains about an attack on his book. What is more surprising still is that he asks if Locke would be willing to write a rebuttal. As Clarke says, “I am in some hopes you may make some remarks your selfe on this booke tho you put not your nam to the publick. . . .”

This letter, with its request for Locke’s intervention in a debate over the Kabbalah, appears extraordinary in the light of modern appraisals of John Locke. The fact of the matter is that Locke did favor the idea of reincarnation. He added a paragraph on the subject to the second edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which appeared in March, 1694, after van Helmont’s visit.

How can one explain this friendship between men usually seen as belonging on opposite ends of the philosophical and scientific spectrum? The answer must be that the clear-cut divisions made by nineteenth and twentieth century historians between rationalists and empiricists, occultists and scientists, vitalists and mechanists are misleading; our categories simply were not theirs.

Locke and van Helmont were friends because of their mutual interest in alchemy and natural philosophy, their sincere interest in religion, and their heartfelt desire to promote tolerance and ecumenism.

The same reasons for the friendship between van Helmont and Locke apply to van Helmont’s friendship with Leibniz. It is surely interesting that for all their philosophical differences, Leibniz and Locke shared certain unorthodox religious views that were similar to those advocated by van Helmont. All three men rejected the doctrine of original sin, predestination, and the eternity of hell. But even more significantly, they rejected Christ’s essential role in salvation. Such ideas were highly unorthodox. Christians routinely dubbed any diminution in Christ’s role as “Jewish,” which helps to explain van Helmont’s imprisonment on the charge of “Judaizing.”

The stigma of being a “judaizer” was also attached to Locke, for he was accused of being, and probably was, a Socinian or Arian. The Arian Jesus is far more like the Kabbalah’s *Adam Kadmon* than the Christian Christ. He is the first among creatures and the mediator between God and man, but he is not in any way equal or consubstantial with the Father. The Christian Hebraist Constantine L’Empereur contemptuously referred to this Socinian view of Christ as a “Jewish” error.

Another Arian influenced by van Helmont, albeit in a different way, was no less a figure than Isaac Newton. It has been suggested that Newton’s conceptions of time and space were indebted to the Kabbalah, and one scholar, Serge Hutin, has gone as far as to describe Newton as a “Christian Kabbalist.” But Newton’s palpable hostility to the Kabbalah undermines such suppositions. This does not mean that Newton was uninfluenced by the Kabbalah. In fact, it was his reading of the *Kabbala denudata*, which had been presented to him by van Helmont, that provided him with ammunition in his battle against Leibniz. [catalogue of Newton’s library refers to “dog-earred pages”] The Leibniz-Clarke debate, in which Newton’s hand is evident, cannot be fully understood without appreciating that Newton’s hostility to Gnosticism lies at its heart. While Newton rejected all varieties of gnostic thought, he was especially antagonized by the Kabbalah. He considered it a major source of the gnostic ideology that had, in
his view, distorted early Christianity by introducing abstruse metaphysical theories and the pantheistic notion of emanation. Newton knew something that most scholars have been unaware of or strenuously denied to this day, namely that Leibniz was a Gnostic and a Kabbalist.  

I hope this brief review shows how important it is to integrate the study of the Kabbalah into the broader history of Europe. The Kabbalah offered something of a permeable barrier between Christian and Jews, allowing the circulation of ideas. Both Christianity and the Kabbalah were profoundly influenced by the same neoplatonic doctrines. Christians were therefore not wrong to discover Christian (or neoplatonized Christian) concepts in the Kabbalah, for Jewish Kabbalists lived for the most part among Christians and absorbed Christian ideas. But the ideas absorbed were attenuated, shorn of dogmatic subtleties, and mixed with Jewish concepts. When Christians rediscovered these ideas, they were therefore very different from their original form. It is perhaps paradoxical that for all the abstruseness of their kabbalistic thought, men like van Helmont (and, I would argue, Leibniz and perhaps Locke as well) ended up with a far more tolerant and ecumenical outlook that many other Christians who have been singled out for their enlightened religious views. By accepting the Lurianic doctrine of tikkun, which undermined the doctrine of an eternal hell or the need for belief in an external savior, van Helmont undercut the need for any institutionalized system of belief. Anyone could and would be saved, whatever his faith. One of the charges leveled against van Helmont by the Inquisition was precisely this: As the indictment reads: “. . . “Helmont maintains without doubt that anyone in his own faith of whatever kind may be saved.”  

I believe this is the position Leibniz came to as a result of his immersion in the Kabbalah. Thus the kabbalistic studies of ecumenically-minded Christians like Francis Mercury van Helmont contributed to the development of the optimistic, non-dogmatic philosophy characteristic of the Enlightenment. As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, charting the influence of the Kabbalah is not only important for gaining a greater appreciation of the way esoteric ideas shaped modern thought, it is also essential for understanding key currents in the modern academic study of religion. In his provocative book Religion After Religion, Steven Wasserstrom contends that the kabbalistic myth of the restoration and reintegration of man to his original divine state inspired the work of Gershom Scholem, Henri Corbin, and Mircea Eliade. As Wasserstrom says, “The History of Religions in their conception operated as a kind of Christian Kabbalah.” It is common knowledge that Scholem’s study of the Jewish Kabbalah was influenced by the Catholic scholar Franz Joseph Molitor, but Wasserstrom goes as far as to say that Scholem’s conception of the Kabbalah was ”more beholden to Schelling, Baader, and Molitor than it was to the Kabbalistic tradition itself.” This is an astonishing and admittedly exaggerated claim, at least in the case of Corbin and Eliade, but it does highlight the importance of studying the Christian Kabbalah. From a marginal preoccupation of scholars of exotericism, the Christian Kabbalah moves toward center stage both as a force in modern history and the study of that history.
1 For example, see George Sarton’s *Introduction to the History of Science*, which was still required reading when I went to college in the 1960s. Sarton’s unequivocal dismissal of magic reveals his Whiggish orientation: “The historian of science can not devote much attention to the study of superstition and magic, that is, of unreason, because this does not help him very much to understand human progress. Magic is essentially unprogressive and conservative; science is essentially progressive; the former goes backward; the latter forward.” *Introduction to the History of Science*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1927-47), 1: 19.


4 *Der Italienisch Lycurgus oder Gesetze und Ordnungen durch und nach welcher die Rechte und Schleunige Gerechtigkeit verfugt wird durch Octavium Pisani.* (Sulzbach, Abraham Lichtenthaler, 1666).

5 *Kabbala denudata.* . . . (Sulzbach: 1677, 1678, 1684).


8 Hanover, Niedersächsische Langesbibliotek. LBR. 389, fol. 125> Leibniz’s statement that van Helmont would have been deified in earlier centuries implied that throughout his life he had lived up to the prevailing ideal of a perfect gentleman, who worked for the public rather than his own private good. John Locke described this idea as follows: “By virtuous actions of this kind heroic men in former times were raised to the sky and placed among the number of noble, purchasing heaven not with amass of reiches brought together from all sides, but with toil, hazards, and liberality.” Cited in John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, religion and responsibility* (Cambridge, 1994), 166. For a discussion of the ideal gentleman in early-modern thought, see Marshall, ch. 5.

9 F.M van Helmont, *A Cabbalistical Dialogue in answer to the Opinion of a learrond Doctor in Philosophy and Theology [Henry More], that the World was made of Nothing.* . . . (1682): “For these are our Positions, 1) That the Creator first brings into being a spiritual Nature. 2) And that either arbitrarily (when he please;) or continually, as he continually understands, generates, etc. 3) That some of these spirits, for some certain cause or reason, are slipt down from the state of knowing, of Penetration. 4) That these Monades or single Beings being now become spiritless or dull, did cling or come together after various manners. 5) That this coalition or clinging together, so long as it remains such, is called matter. 6) That out of this matter, all things material do consist, which yet shall in time return again to a more loosned and free state. No contradiction is involved in all these. Hence the Creator may also be said to be the efficient cause of all things materiated or made material, although not immediately.” For a fuller discussion of Leibniz’s indebtedness to van Helmont for the concept of monad, see Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, ch. 4.


20 Clarke to Locke, 11 Febraury, 1694, The Correspondence of John Locke, 5: 97ff.
21 Essay, II. xxviii.27. James G. Buickerood (Philosophy Department, Washington University thinks it possible that Locke may have been introduced to the idea of reincarnation through Damaris Cudwroth and that he may have know about van Helmont’s Two Hundred Queries even before its publication in 1684 (personal communication).
22 After I delivered a shortened version of this paper at the Houghton Library, a woman objected that I was blurring boundaries to the point that the history of philosophy was no longer intelligible. But I would argue that false categories make for false history. Rather than blurring boundaries, I hope I am making them more precise.
23 For Locke, see Marshall, *John Locke*, ch. 4, especially p. 131ff. For Leibinz, see Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, ch. 6.
27 Newton appears to have perused the *Kabbala denudata* carefully. Harrison says some fifteen pages have been turned “down” or “up,” and that there are “several other signs of dog-ear” (John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
28 Other people apparently knew this as well. In an anonymous review of Leibniz’s system of pre-established harmony published in the *Histoire Critique de la Republique des Lettres*, the author comes right out and says that although he finds Leibniz’s philosophy unintelligible, there is nothing novel about it; it comes straight out of the *Kabbala denudata*. This review has been attributed to John Toland. Historie Critique de la Republique des Lettres, 1716, Article V, pp. 116-71.

Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 39. Wasserstrom also refers to Eliade’s “lifetime infatuation with Christian Kabbalah” (p. 43) and to the “explicit” nature of Corbin’s Christian Kabbalism (p. 48).

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: the Study of Western Esotericism Between Counterculture and New Complexity,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, NS 1 (2001): 5-37. Hanegraaff claims that Wasserstrom overemphasizes the influence of the Christian Kabbalah in relation to that of German Romantic Illuminism and Naturphilosophie. Nevertheless, he accepts Wasserstrom’s contention that western esotericism, including the Christian Kabbalah, is of key importance in understanding the nature and origin of the kind of “religionism” characterizing the Eranos approach.